



Implicit and explicit cultural clashes

film
**American
Factory**
Dirs: Julia
Reichert,
Steven Bognar

The documentary *American Factory* is a story about China and America: it is therefore a story about cultural clashes. The clash between the titan that was, and the titan that is, at least for now. It follows events as the Chinese company Fuyao repurposes an old General Motors factory in Dayton, Ohio, to manufacture glass for cars.

The implicit and explicit clashes between Chinese and American values shown in the film reminded me of conflicts in the early 80s and 90s between America and Japan, when many enterprises in the US were taken under the management of the Japanese. Now there is China, an adversary in many ways, and a real superpower which is asserting its influences all over the world since becoming a member of the World Trade Organisation.

Workers' rights feature strongly in the film. Commitment to these run deep in both the USA and the People's Republic of China. The former values individuality (Rentfrow et al., 2013) while the latter places value on the common goals amongst ingroup members (Hui & Triandis, 1986). The struggle is between those who rule multi-national enterprises with an iron grip, and the ordinary people, and you don't get more

hardcore about American values than in Ohio.

We see the CEO of Fuyao, C.T. Wong, instructing staff to pay attention to local customs, telling them, 'when in Rome, do what the Romans do'. However he is blinded to, or is fighting against, American values of collective power – the right to form a workers' union where power comes from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. The concepts of power distance and individualism-collectivism are played out between the Chinese and Americans, as the latter struggle to bring the union into the plant, and the former actively resist.

At times, I didn't see the difference in culture, because work conditions in the 1920s in the States resemble conditions in a lot of factories in China today. The film shows that workers across the two nations (or cultures, or value systems) share basic human needs, and a sense of obligation to care for loved ones.

But differences in the management of people and operations ring true to some of the ideas that cultural psychologists investigate. For example, awareness of workers' safety and wellbeing are salient in the US. This is not so much the case in China, where people can be sent to work in lonely, harsh and harmful situations. When

some of the Americans visit Fuyao's Chinese factory, they are shocked to see elderly staff picking and sorting broken glass in the scrap yard without proper protective clothing. One of the Chinese interviewees recalls burning himself severely at work as he perfects the continuity of the conveyor operation.

Some things seem not to have changed. I was reminded of the Hollywood comedy *Gung Ho* (1986), about the takeover of an American car plant by a Japanese corporation. There is a scene where foreman Hunt (Michael Keaton) tries to mediate a conflict between Saito (Sab Shimono) and Buster (George Wendt). Buster values autonomy, while Saito values standardisation and doing things effectively and efficiently – the 'one way'. Over 30 years later, the same value struggle is played out in real life in *American Factory*, between Timi (a Furnace Technician) and Wong (a Furnace Supervisor). At this point, you may refer to the construct of uncertainty avoidance.

So has the world really not changed since the 80s? Have people become no more sensitive to cultural preference? Certainly the film is very balanced, and shows the frustrations on both sides. Many of the Chinese workers have been sent to America for two years, to work with the Americans who are less familiar with the glass-making process. They spend long hours in the factory. It is also metaphorically their home, since their dormitory is literally a few blocks away. They work 50 weeks through the year, and spend just two weeks with their family back in China during festival seasons.

Psychologists, and others in cultural studies, pride themselves in explaining and predicting differences in behaviours across ethnic, national or cultural divides. Since the 1950s, cultural dimensions have become the focus for multi-international companies (Hofstede, 1980; 2003), as they grasp the challenges in handling people with similar and vast differences in beliefs, customs, norms, values and ethics.

As a scientist working on and off of topics about cultural differences, I recognised some of the classic dimensions of Hofstede and Bond (1988) in *American Factory*. I even checked recent developments of these classic constructions, to see if they've been discredited or replaced. My brief audit found they have been justly criticised and challenged (Baskerville, 2003), but are still robust to this day.

This review is not intended to offer proof of current popular theories about cultural differences based on the documentary. But while scholars are arguing over the exact details at the theoretical level, I feel the audience would agree that there are undoubtedly differences in the way people influence and relate to each other across the cultural divide.

Reviewed by Dr Kevin Cheng, an industrial and organisational psychologist at Regent's University London.

References are available in the online and app versions

Uncertain and volatile lives

The Park family reside high up in an angular and pristine house. Everyone walks around in slippers on stretches of stone and wooden flooring; it looks barely lived in. As the Kims run back to their home, the camera pans as they glide downhill, downstairs, moving perpetually downwards in the rain until they reach their small, enclosed, and now flooded, semi-basement; to the bottom of society.

In *Parasite*, Bong Joon-ho artistically portrays class disparity through the interaction of two families living in Seoul. The Kims are a lower-class family, earning a living by folding pizza boxes in a semi-basement, based on Seoul's banjiha apartments that make city living affordable. The Park family, on the other hand, depend on the patriarch and business tycoon, Dong-ik, for their healthy income. This allows them to reside in a deliciously modern abode.

Parasite seamlessly transitions between genres. What I enjoyed the most was the way Bong Joon-ho uses his characters to show the way adversity can stretch the human mind, and the lengths we will go to adapt to it. Anthony Giddens (1991) discusses the existential difficulties that arise from 'ontological insecurity', when a person has lost faith in how reliable the world around them is, and cannot trust their understanding of external realities. Developmental psychology also talks about how unpredictable environments and adversity can lead to behaviourally and emotionally dysregulated psychological function (Ellis et al., 2012), risky behaviour (Ellis et al., 2009) but also creativity (Jovchelovitch, 2014). *Parasite* touches upon all of these. In the



context of a capitalist society, where money can buy a family stability, we observe all characters experiencing life uncertainties, but the impoverished ones struggle the most to navigate them.

The Kims end up as employees for the Park family, gaining this employment in questionable ways. As their façade reaches new heights in its complexity, their morale reaches new lows. Lying in a temporary refuge, away from their flooded house, Kai-taek laments: 'If you plan, something will always go wrong... Do you think these people got up this morning and said, "Tonight I'm going to sleep on a dirty floor with hundreds of strangers"? But look where they are now. Look where we are.' The Kims are driven to initially light-hearted and amusing, but eventually undignified and tragic ends to navigate the precarity of their lives.

The film does illustrate how this same uncertainty affects wealthy families as well. The Parks deal with deceptive employees and troubled children, but they have the financial means to tackle these problems.

As perhaps a commentary on the rigidity of social class and the myth of meritocracy, rejected by Ki-woo when the scholar's rock (believed to bring prosperity) is put back in a stream, the Kims remain where they are. Their uncertain and volatile lives cause them injury, death and criminalisation. They sit and imagine new futures in different places, whilst still trapped below in basements.

Reviewed by Almas Talib, masters student in social and cultural psychology at the London School of Economics.

References are available online

film
Parasite
Dir: Bong
Joon-ho



A world without trees?

podcast
Forest 404
BBC Sounds

Forest 404 is a BBC Sounds scripted podcast, set in the 24th Century, in a world where nature doesn't exist. This dystopian thriller features protagonist Pan, who is a sound archivist from the future, known as the Fast Times. Her job is to sift through thousands of audio recordings and delete those which are useless. Pan stumbles upon an audio file from the 21st Century which haunts her, a sound

so unfamiliar, she just cannot let go. When she finds this old recording of a tropical rainforest; she is perplexed, because 'forests no longer exist'...

A concerned Pan embarks on her quest to find out the truth about the Slow Times (21st century) and what really happened to nature.

This podcast was recommended to me solely due to



Have you ever dreamt of stepping into a painting? To become completely immersed in the work before you, making reality around you fade into the new world created by the artist? In 'Van Gogh – The Immersive Experience' you can do just that, thanks to neat use of venues and projection, along with a virtual reality offering.

The exhibition showcases Van Gogh's life in a new way: his time at the convent and in Arles, the secrets from the letters he wrote to his brother and more. We see how his paintings 'bear the mark of his unstable, tormented personality'. For example, 'Wheatfield with crows', which many consider to be Van Gogh's final work before he took his own life at the age of 37, symbolises his fight 'against despair, loneliness and exile'. The picture, we are told, represents his anxious state of mind, symbolised by the dark, threatening sky, the empty, unpeopled field, and three roads going different ways to indicate decision. The presence of the crows creates an anguished atmosphere, as if proclaiming an inevitable

fate. In these final works, the fields and plains of the countryside are empty. 'No more peasants, not even a reaper. Only nature abides. For no-one.'

Van Gogh's use of colour gets special mention, including the idea that he may have been – like me – colour blind. The Van Gogh museum itself disputes that. But he was clearly fascinated by colour, saying 'colour in a painting is like enthusiasm in life'.

The exhibition isn't cheap, at £38 for a family ticket which doesn't include the VR experience (£3 per person extra). But I found the VR experience in particular well worth it: it takes visitors deep into Van Gogh's life in Arles, travelling through eight works and their sources of inspiration: Vincent's room, the meadows, the forest, the village and ending with *Starry Night* over the Rhone River. JS

The exhibition is on at All Saints' Church in Leicester until 3 May and St Mary's in York until 19 April. www.vangoghexpo.co.uk

the theme music by Bonobo, one of my favourite artists. Each episode is accompanied by a soundscape as well as a talk which explores the themes that inspired the series, featuring musicians, anthropologists and bio-futurists. One of the more inspirational of these is by Alex Smalley on how spending time in nature affects our mental wellbeing. Eco psychologists attest that exposure to nature is vital for the psychological and physical health of humans, and substantial scientific evidence supports these claims. The link between nature and mental wellbeing is nothing new. He goes on to explore the loss of connection between humans and nature that has emerged in the last 200 years between, due in no small part to advances in technology and pharmaceuticals. Although these advances have been incredibly beneficial for society, this shift away from the natural world has meant that the connection is forgotten.

Forest 404 excellently provokes the listener to acknowledge that modern society takes nature for

granted. The series guides listeners to imagine the world we know today as a thing of the past, a future where all we have left of nature is an audio file of a rainforest, a chilling thought to say the least.

The Virtual Nature project partnered with the BBC alongside this series to create the Forest 404 Experiment. 7600 people participated in the experiment which closed at the end of September 2019 to analyse the therapeutic potential of nature-based sounds. Previous research about nature and wellbeing (e.g. from Pamela Pensini, see tinyurl.com/vncekec) has primarily focused on the visual effects of nature, but this study will contribute new knowledge about how people respond to different sounds in nature. More about the experiment and its findings can be found on: <https://virtual-nature.com/latest> and <https://virtual-nature.com/blog/sneak-peek>

Reviewed by Abreen Rebello, Psychology BSc student at Birkbeck.

The personal and psychological experience of gender

exhibition
**Genders:
Shaping and
Breaking the
Binary**
Science Gallery

Throughout the scientific disciplines, a binary approach is taken to simplify facts and create easily accessible categories. Psychology is full of clear divides, all-or-nothing categories to help us create shortcuts in everyday life – from psychometric tests to conceptions of masculine and feminine. In my undergraduate course, I often had to choose ‘prefer not to say’ rather than male/female in research that failed to consider the

difference between sex and gender, with the latter becoming understood as a fluid concept.

Genders at Science Gallery London (SGL) is opening up new conversations through science and art to reflect on our understanding of gender, encompassing further relevant factors such as class, culture and race.

The work is engaging, innovative, and does justice to those that it represents. Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley’s ‘choose your own adventure’ video game is a stunning piece of work, serving as an archive for the black transgender community, with players navigating through different histories depending on their choices. Mary Maggic brings new topics of biotechnology and bioremediation to the discussion of gender with a river of agar and fungi, contrasting the themes of inviting and digesting contamination. Questions are raised on how the effects of plastic pollution and climate change will influence our bodies, subsequently changing our understanding of gender.

Although encompassing the perspectives and lives of LGBTQ+ individuals, the Genders exhibition highlights that how we understand gender today is an issue that affects all of us. Dividing traits into

‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ damages those who aim to strive to match the norms assigned to each role. With women historically associated with the caregiver role, this leaves those who are unable or do not want to reproduce as assumed to be not contributing to ‘the future’. Once U Care, You’re Future by Laura Yuile highlights this problem, with footage of plastic babies being swept up with overhead announcements reflecting how children’s voices are used to sell technology.

Damaging associations of masculinity are also addressed. The Work Out Play Charter, an ongoing research project at King’s College London alongside male athletes, has been created to tackle issues such as consent and bystander intervention. The work also touches on expressing emotions among one another to gain support and help.

What unites the 18 very different works is collaboration and authenticity. The exhibition gives insight into the minds and lives of others, beautifully reflecting the personal and psychological experience of gender.

Reviewed by Georgia Jerwood, a recent psychology graduate working as a Mediator at the Science Gallery.



Tristan Fewings / Getty Images

At www.thepsychologist.org.uk/reviews, John Barry visits *Masculinities* at the Barbican (pictured).

Plus Nguyễn Minh Phú’o’ng watches *This is Going to Hurt*, and Hugo Metcalfe on *Failed by the NHS*.